

Firebird Nested in Darkness

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Verse One: No Going Home

Marion managed to trudge out to the alleyway before he started to quietly cry. He looked around the alleyway. Seeing the poster with its secret agent in Dark Glasses and a dark suit and tie, Marion clenched his teeth and threw his sleeping bag at the poster.

"I didn't ask to hallucinate a whole pile a inane nonsense! I don't need to be seeing arsonist pheasants and space spiders and wannabe secret agents and knock-off Narnias with special zombies!"

The sleeping bag unfurled and flopped to the ground like a giant piece of red bubble gum. Marion slumped over and dropped onto his knees on the sleeping bag. He knelt, crying quietly.

"Well I screwed that up royally. My life was crappy enough as it was. I was just barely holding it together. And now it's all broken. I didn't have big dreams. I wasn't going to be the next Peter Jackson. I wasn't even going to be the next Roger Ebert. But I could have run a successful movie and book blog. I could have built a nice little commentary and review site and been clever and snarky and had people pay me to write stuff. But apparently that was more than you guys wanted to give me. I get to go insane prophet at the worst possible time. So now what? Are you happy? Or do you want to kick me again?"

Movement drew Marion's attention from the poster. As he focused his vision, he caught a glimpse of another government agent watching him. Marion blinked and the figure was gone.

"Typical. Rodney Dangerfield would pity me for the amount of respect the universe accords me."

"Did you ever ask why the universe if doing this?"

"Why bother? Wait." Marion answered and then stopped suddenly and stood up looking around wildly for the source of the new voice. The Alley remained empty.

"I'm afraid I don't have the luxury of waiting. You think the universe is kicking you. Have you ever considered the possibility that you are not being kicked, but rather nudged?"

"Nudged? This was one hell of a nudge. I now own precisely thirteen things in this world if you count each sock and shoe as a separate item and also include my overdrawn bank account and soon to be cancelled credit card. What's the universe do for an encore? Kill all my family members, because I don't even know where you'd look for them. I guess my family was round one and this was round two, right? Maybe a warrant for my arrest? Maybe give me malignant cancer? What's round three?"

"You keep saying 'universe', you should be saying 'story'."

Marion kept spinning and suddenly saw the delivery guy from the bookstore standing at the entrance to the alley in his tweed jacket and red shirt. Marion noticed this time, that the man had a gold lapel pin of a bird on the left lapel.

"It is you. Why are you doing this to me? What are you doing? What is this? If this is a story, why are you stealing all the most cliché elements from every other story?"

"Not cliché, archetypal."

"Great you're going to ruin my life because we disagree on literary semantics."

"Stories are cyclical. Each telling creates the story anew in the mind of the audience, who tells it again. Stories resurrect themselves. The phoenix and the story are the same. Unless the story is lost."

"Of course a brain tumour of mine would cause me to hallucinate an argumentative literary god. I'm going to die while engaging in critical discourse with an amalgam of every pretentious classmate and professor I ever had. Brilliant."

"Everyone dies. The stupid error of this age is to chase immortality, burning the future to prolong the present. This is what life is like without a story. This is what life will look like if the story remains lost."

The air around Marion shimmered and the terrain altered. The location was the same, but buildings were ruined and abandoned, police tape festooned every outcropping and no window remained unbroken. Orange traffic cone and orange plastic safety barricades. Several trash cans burned in the distance. Buildings were stained white with ash from fires and bullet marks cut pockmarked lines across most facades.

In front of Marion, in place of the delivery man was a young girl. She was maybe fifteen or sixteen years old with short black hair and a pleasantly cute round face. She was dressed brown with a red spider web logo on her hooded sweater. She wore a reflective orange vest on over top her sweater.

"You came back." She said, "I didn't think you would. Where's Walker?:"

"Okay, I don't think we've met before. At least not from my point of view."

"I don't understand. We have met, that's not a question."

"I've been hallucinating a lot of things lately, but I haven't hallucinated you or the city in ruins before. This is new."

"Then how have I met you?"

"It's a time travel paradox thing. So when I hallucinate you again, I'll be able to use the stuff I know from this conversation to help you."

"But this isn't a hallucination, and I need help now. The factions are at war. the refugees are piling up. People are dying. I know this hasn't happened yet in your time Dreamer. But please, I need help. You said that the secret was to save First Mother and keep her story true. Have you done that yet?"

"This is the first I've heard of it. But I promise I'll do my best."

"No, you must do better. You swore to my mother upon your place in the story. You must do this or what you see will come to pass."

"Wait, what?" Marion said. But as he spoke, the girl and the post-apocalyptic future version of the city faded away.

Marion shook his head. The world again looked normal.

"If this was a movie, I'd shoot the director." Marion muttered, "So what are the chances that, in denial of all physical realities and all known laws of science, I am in fact having a series of mystic visions of some sort of magical European past and also some sort of cliched post-apocalyptic future? Let's see. Zombies that they refuse to call zombies? Check. Quest to save a chosen child? Check. Evil Empire oppressing people? Check. Secret CIA clone looking agent-esque secret police? Check. Heavy symbolism? Check. Oblique references to rebel and/or noble savage resistance forces? Check. Post Apocalyptic setting? Check. Anachronistic faux Europe fantasy setting? Check. Prophecies that foretell what must be done? Check. If this is real, then I have having visions of the most cliched mystic vision quest ever conceived. If it's hallucinations brought on by a brain tumour, well it doesn't say great things for the originality of my sub-conscious either. But hallucination girl is right, first good advice I've received from these things. I do need to do better. Okay, I'm in trouble and I've got no options. What can I do? Who can I turn to in my time of need?"

Marion nodded to himself and reached into his pocket. He picked up his phone and selected his first saved contact.

The phone rang once and then a familiar voice answered, "This is Harley, I can hear you."

Harley listened as marion poured out everything that had gone wrong in the brief time since they'd spoken last. He listened as Marion explained the escalating visions that were probably just hallucinations. He listened as marion explained the horrible chain of misfortune that led to his firing. He listened as Marion talked about the weird bits with the Salt family where it seemed like his hallucinations might mean something. Harley listened. He didn't interrupt, just occasionally asked questions to make sure he understood what Marion was trying to convey. He didn't mock Marion or dismiss anything that Marion said. He just listened.

"So what do I do?" Marion asked as he finished.

"You bunk at my place until you get back on your feet."

"No, bad idea." Marion immediately objected, "Amy doesn't like me. You've said yourself your landlady doesn't like me. And I know things are tight with you as well."

"I hear what you're saying Marion, but I'm not leaving you to sleep in the park and I don't have any other way to help you. My family doesn't live anywhere near close enough to help and you don't have any family left to ask to help. We'll have to work around my landlady. And Amy will have to manage."

"Amy doesn't manage. She could part the harbour waters by deciding she wanted to walk out to a boat without getting wet."

"Be reasonable Marion. She's not that bad."

"Me staying at your place is going to place all kinds of stress on your life that you aren't really safe to carry." Marion argued, "I don't want to be the dead beat friend who screws up his buddy's romantic comedy dynamic. Your landlord will want to raise the rent if she finds out there's an extra person. And you talk about how the changing technology is shaking up your industry and nothing is safe, like everyone is afraid that they're going to make Skynet or turn machines self aware or summon the Borg from Delta Quadrant or something like that."

"Marion, your other alternative is to sleep under a tree in the park. and I can't do that to my friend. You're crashing on my couch while you look for a new job."

Marion took a breath and smiled, "Thanks. Now the only question is whether I should be more concerned with possibility that I have a brain tumour or the possibility that I'm the chosen hero of a fantasy shadow world."

Harley laughed quietly on the other line, "Well if you're a mythic hero of fantasy land we'll know when the mystic warriors bust down our door."

"Wow," Marion said, "Why don't you just cap it off by asking what else can go wrong?"

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The two knights of Purity knelt in the throne room of the Locust King.

"A man appears and summons twin tomahawks, the weapons of the Dreamer. The Dreamer! And you let him get away?"

"There was a wendigo as well Majesty. It killed one of our number. The stranger assisted us. But it couldn't have been the actual dreamer, he was no where near skilled enough with the weapons to be the Dreamer." The older soldier said.

The captive wizard Myrddhin stood to The Locust King's left, dressed in black with a cloak that was lined inside with a design of stars and screaming faces. As the soldiers waited, Myrddhin leaned in, "Perhaps the dreamer is early in his path, a novice yet. And without the Walker beside him, he is no threat. Perhaps more pressing is the threat of Blackhart and his alliance of tribes. Reports say that Blackhart's savages have ambushed three expeditionary forces into the lowlands. We have no credible maps of the area and do not know where his villages are hiding. We cannot beat him if we cannot meet him on the battlefield."

"And Blackhart cannot strike at our centre or do enough damage to stop our expansion. He's nothing more than a delay. And you call him savage? As though you aren't one yourself? That's the genius of the Empire Myrddhin, sooner or later everyone becomes a citizen of the Empire. Where's the Bone Man? I want the Dreamer dealt with before he can reach full potential. That grubby little insurrectionist is not stealing my children. The line will remain unbroken and Mordred will ascend to my throne after I have finished my rule."

"Do you really think this is a matter requiring the Bone Man? I could send a contingent of the Knights of Purity after them. Why bother the Bone Man?"

"I know the stories Myrddhin. You know the stories. Do not underestimate him because of his current condition, that is the mistake of advisors the world over. Do not allow prophecies to be fulfilled. Prophecies are created by people who need change. We are in power and so any prophecy will not benefit us. And so we must oppose the prophecy as soon as we hear a whisper of it."

"As you say my lord, but I think of other stories where the King did indeed try to prevent the prophecy early and in so doing caused the prophecy to come to pass."

"That is a risk, of course. That's why I'm sending the Bone Man and not just a few of his knights."

Myrddhin nodded and stepped back. The Locust King looked down at the two Knights.

"Send word to your commander. I want him to lead a detachment of his best personally to find and eliminate this nascent Storyteller and his counterpart. He may take as many as he needs, but he must finish the job. Myrddhin. Send for Lord Dracha and Lady Cinnabar, we will have to adjust for the loss of

the Bone Man and his elite in the coming skirmishes with Blackhart. And have Morrigan bring my son to the hall, I want Mordred to see this. He will king one day and should not cling so close to his mother's apron."

Verse Two: The Chorus and the Magpie

Harley's landlady could be heard walking above them. The floors creaked with each step, and the old house seemed to flex with each footfall. Harley looked up reflexively each time the creaks announced that the landlady's movement through the house. The landlady was a widow, Marion knew this. And Marion knew that the rent for Harley's basement suite was very low, even accounting for the fact that the suite did not include laundry and had only a shower and not a bathtub.

Harley clasped his hands behind him, letting Marion know how concerned the situation had made his friend. Harley's father worked as an accountant and his mother worked a claims investigator for an insurance firm. Harley's parents had trained Harley that everything needed to be in neat little lines and carefully documented, that any error could be fatal. Harley had not internalized this as thoroughly as they had hoped. Despite this deviance from his parent's teachings, Marion had always trusted Harley to be the reliable one, the steady and methodical one. Harley didn't yell, didn't fly off the handle, didn't jump at shadows, didn't get drunk and take an inflatable moose to prom. Marion did that stuff, and Harley still pulled Marion's fat out of the fire.

"I'm sorry to do this to you. I feel like a colossal screw up. And I'm starting to think I really do have something wrong with my brain."

"Your problem is that you're too nice and don't know how to compromise your standards. That's a tough combination." Harley said in his usual level voice, the kind of voice you would use to speak to panicking toddler.

"You're the one who's too nice. How many times are you going to help me after I screw things up?"

"All of them." Harley said, "Who collected pop cans all summer so I could afford to go on the exchange program to Greece? Who cleaned up the Chemistry lab after I blew up the fume hood, so I didn't have to stay behind and miss the basketball quarter finals? Who skipped class to run to the flower shop to buy

flowers for Amy when I found she was allergic to the flowers I'd already bought? You've helped me just as often as I've helped you. We're best friends and that's what you do."

Marion looked away and wiped his eyes before turning back.

"Thanks. That means a lot to me."

"We're friends. Night and Day. That's not going to change. I've got your back. The challenge here is my landlady."

"I don't really know her, except that she's kind of a funny old lady."

"Mrs. Critchwood is a suspicious lady who doesn't rent to loud renters and doesn't trust quiet renters. She doesn't work and needs to rent out the basement suite to make enough money to get by, but she doesn't like doing that."

"Why doesn't she like quiet renters?" Marion asked.

"She thinks they're up to something. She thinks everyone is up to something."

"She'd really have a problem with me crashing at your place while I get back on my feet?"

"She has a problem with Amy staying the night. Although that's partially because she has a problem with us 'being sinful in the eyes of the almighty' or something equally old fashioned. So yeah. She has a problem with everything."

"So I just stay out of sight in the mornings. I come over a fair amount already. How would she know if I'm staying here if she doesn't see me before noon?"

"She comes and goes at all hours, so it won't be easy. She's on long-term disability from her job, I don't know what for- she just says it's something you can't see."

Harley walked back and forth as he spoke, closing his eyes frequently to concentrate.

"I don't think she sleeps much, and she's up awfully early. She gardens a lot, which is going to make sneaking in and out difficult. You'll need a job as quick as possible, so you need to be handing out

resumes. But you'll have to check if she's outside. If she's in the house, she likes to sit in the living room. I see her staring out the window all the time when I come home, so use the back yard to avoid being seen. But don't do that around noon or dinner time, she'll be in the kitchen then."

"You make this sound like a James Bond movie."

"It basically will be. The rent is really good here and I don't want to lose this place, but she's completely unhinged and that complicates things."

As Marion listened to Harley, he heard the door open and looked to see Amy closing the door behind her as she entered. Amy was Harley's girlfriend, she stood about five feet tall and was a tiny faerie like girl who seemed vulnerable to even the slightest breeze. Her face scrunched as though she had eaten a whole grapefruit when she saw Marion.

"The freak is here, I see. I thought we were alone tonight." She said as she dropped her tote bag in the entry way and kicked off her fur lined boots, "What was your plan for dinner? Are we sharing our dinner with the loonie?"

Harley turned to face Amy as he answered, "I hadn't taken the time to think about dinner. Marion's in a pickle and I've been helping him. He needs a place to stay for a while."

Amy narrowed her eyes and Harley began to pace again in response.

"And where is he going to stay?" Amy asked, her voice rising in tone and volume as she spoke.

"He's been evicted from his place." Harley said, "His landlord is a jerk and so is his boss. So he got fired and evicted as a result of a kind of ludicrous pile of bad luck and weird coincidences. I mean this is the sort of thing in a story that makes you think the author is out of ideas and so he's just going to play go. You either laugh or cry. So he has no job and no home right now. So he needs a place to stay. And he's my best friend, so I'm letting him sleep on the couch while he gets things sorted." Harley maintained his usual tone as he spoke although as he continued to speak he began to speed up, his words starting to bump into each other on the way out.

Amy shook her head and continued to scrunch her face up. "The loonie has moved in with you? He was bad enough when he just visited occasionally. You are not getting laid while he's around to listen and enjoy himself."

"I can go for a walk." Marion offered.

"That's a good idea," Amy said, squaring her feet and placing her hands on her shoulders, "Take your junk with you and find a park bench. That's about your standard, right?"

"Hey." Harley said, his voice just a hair above it's normal calm level, "Marion is my best friend. It's not appropriate to talk to him like that."

"Come on guys," Marion said, "Don't fight. Let's not follow the script to every crummy romantic comedy ever made."

"Do you hear him insulting me?" Amy's voice rose to a shrill edge.

"That wasn't an insult. He doesn't want us to fight. I don't want us to fight." Harley kept his voice even as he spoke, but he was still pacing.

"He's the cause of the fight, so he doesn't get a say in what happens in this house." Amy thrust an index finger to the ground for emphasis as she spoke.

"I've known him since we were little. I've known him longer than I've known anybody but my family. He's my best friend."

"He's a loonie and screw up and now he's a mooch." As Amy spoke, Harley kept looking up at his ceiling in short little glances. His eyes would flick upward and then return to looking at Amy as she spoke. "I can talk about him how I like, and you don't get to tell what to do."

"I'm not telling you what to do." Marion said, he voice perfectly level, "I am pointing out that you are being mean to my best friend after he has had maybe the worst day of his life. And I am pointing out that such behaviour isn't very nice."

"Tough. Weaklings are nice and the world walks all over them. It's walking over you right now and apparently sleeping on your couch. Marion is a loonie who needs to be put in an asylum- and if you want to let your place be that asylum then that's just proof at how much he manipulates you.

"Maybe I should just go." Marion said.

"Best idea you've ever had." Amy answered.

"You aren't going." Harley said to Marion. Then he turned and spoke to Amy again, "You would honestly let him sleep on a park bench? Do you think that's the decent thing to do?"

"The decent thing wouldn't be for him to barge into your home and your life like this. He just needs to go. In fact, I not going to spend time here when that loonie is still in the building. Either he sleeps here or I do, not both. You can decide who's more important to you. But if he's not gone soon, I'm going to let Mrs. Witch Lady upstairs know that Marion is here. Then we'll see what's decent."

Amy then turned around and stuffed her feet back in her boots and stormed out. She slammed the door very loudly on the way out and Harley flinched and looked up to the ceiling again.

There was a long moment of silence in which the two friends stared at the door.

"Well that didn't go well." Harley finally said in to the silence.

"She forgot her tote bag." Marion said.

Verse Three: The Path of Fear

After Amy left, the mood became significantly more awkward. Harley kept trying to obliquely assure Marion that no harm had been done. Marion kept pointing out that Amy's ultimatum was more than no harm. And the two eventually descended into an uncomfortable silence as they sat on the brown microfiber couch watching Horrible Science Fiction movies from the seventies on Harley's old tube television. Some time after eleven Harley wandered to bed after throwing Marion some sheets and a pillow, leaving Marion alone with the cold white glow of the television talking about the terrors of the unknown and the evils come to devour mankind from outer space.

Marion wasn't ready to fall asleep and face his probably hallucinogenic nightmares, and continued watching the parade of dark and lurid entertainment on the shimmering screen before him. Bored with dated science fiction plots, Marion began channel surfing and eventually settled on watching the

Lovecraftian horror classic "In the Mouth of Madness", about an insurance investigator who finds himself drawn into a web of insanity by an author who seems able to control reality itself by his storytelling.

The story climaxed with the investigator hiding in a mental institution pretending to be insane so that he could hide there. Marion didn't appreciate the parallels, but kept watching until the world ended and the film was over.

As the film ended, a television show began to play, one with which Marion wasn't familiar. Called the 'Unbroken Line', the series opened with a gleaming glass highrise identical to the one from Harley's earlier Firebird hallucination. Dramatic orchestral music and ominous faux latin chanting rose as the camera panned around the tower before using a wipe cut to transition to an interior shot of an austere white and grey office occupied by a man standing with his back to the camera looking out at the skyline.

Three government agent looking men entered from off camera, dark glasses and ear pieces visible. They stood in a line behind the man, who ignored them. The agent in the centre raised his right hand and touched his index finger to his ear piece.

"Bring her in."

The man remained motionless with his back to the agents.

"We've discussed your debts, you are aware how much you owe if our agreement is to continue." The centre agent said.

The man at the window said nothing. The agent on the left spoke.

"You have yet to meet the quotas. The quotas are not negotiable. If you wish us to provide continued assistance, you must provide us with the agreed quotas."

The man at the window spoke, "Feast with me and starve tomorrow. Fight against me and die today. That's the deal, right?"

The centre agent spoke again, "The feast can only be maintained by meeting the quota. Your success has resulted in growth. Growth means a larger empire to sustain. A larger empire requires a larger quota to maintain our end of the bargain. This is not negotiable. There are consequences for failing to meet your side of the contract."

The door behind the agents opened and from where he stood Marion could see a four agent had entered the office with Maia, Fitzroy and Mary Salt. Marion turned sharply back to look at the man at the window as he finally turned around.

"They don't need to be here." Darius Salt said quietly.

"They have value, beyond their mere biological worth, beyond their labour value. They can be used to meet the quotas. All of them have power, value to the story. Any one of them could dramatically improve your progress towards meeting the quota."

As the agents spoke, the walls of the office began to shatter in slow motion and drift away, leaving a vast black and white checkerboard floor extending as far as the eye could see. A grey fog rolled in, wet with steam and soot. And coiling out of the fog came the enormous serpentine figure of Falsenight. The huge oily black Python radiated steam as he moved across the tiles. Marion spun around and realized that he was now standing in a long line of people slowly marching up to be devoured systematically by Falsenight. Looking ahead, Marion saw Harley standing in line, much closer to Falsenight imposes jaws than Marion.

Darius Salt stood to the side of the whole spectacle with the agents and his family.

"I will not offer my son for the quota. My line will remain unbroken. I cannot continue the line without an heir."

"Then offer one or both of the females, with them added to the quota you might still succeed in reaching the current quota."

"One of the females. You mean my wife and daughter! You're asking me to be a cannibal! You may as well ask me to gnaw my own leg off!"

Falsenight paused in his meal and hissed at Darius, "It may come to that, but not yet. And why this pretence of honour now? You repeatedly strike your mate, and verbally abuse both of them. Any loyalty to them is overshadowed by your treatment of them. This veneer of morality is unconvincing and comes much too late. I hunger and I will be fed. You know this Darius." The last syllable hissed across the room.

"Don't you make me the villain!" Darius roared, "I didn't do this alone, you helped me. You tempted me and encouraged me."

"Yes, we did. And that is what we do. We tempt. And you accepted our bargain. We did not deceive you. Now you must meet the quota or pay the price of not doing so. What is your choice Darius?"

Marion broke from the line and ran to Harley. He grabbed Harley by the wrist and dragged his friend out of the line. The agents turned as one, "The Dreamer is here. The Walker is here. We are exposed. But they have not awakened. They are vulnerable. Pursue and apprehend the targets."

Marion dragged Harley along as the footsteps of the men of Black and White echoed on the checkerboard floor. Marion could feel them getting closer and closer until he suddenly felt a hand grab his shoulder and he jolt up from the couch flailing wildly and knocked Harley backwards in surprise. Harley's arms pinwheeled and he regained his balance and looked at Marion with a slight but noticeable expression of pity.

"Bad dreams?"

"You have no idea." Marion answered, looking around at the early morning light playing across the basement suite walls.

"You had a rough day yesterday, I would have been surprised to hear that you slept well. No offence."

"Yeah, but the hallucinations or dreams or visions or whatever are starting to tie together. I don't know that they're making sense yet. It's kind of like like a Peanut butter Thai hamburger."

"Did I just hear you right?"

"See that's exactly it. If I started pulling out sweet thai sauce and peanut butter and bacon and then starting frying up a hamburger, you'd know I was cooking something, but you wouldn't know what until I started assembling the whole thing. And it tastes so amazing too. You have to use crunchy peanut butter though or it just doesn't work."

"Like your metaphor?"

"But you get the idea right? I'm getting visions of things that seem all different. Government agents and evil Lord of the Ring type Empires and space birds and now Darius Salt and his family are part of it, and it looks like Darius is somehow secretly the Evil King and his Wife is the lady from my visions who wants me to save her kids and its all getting really freaky, because the government agent guys that have been watching me seem to be shaking him down and he doesn't like it, so I don't know what's going on."

"If I've heard you right, the only thing that's actually happened is that you've been seeing things, dreams or hallucinations."

"You think it's a tumour." Marion said flatly.

"Did you hear me say 'tumour'? I'm not assuming any kind of cause here. I'm just listening to what you've actually said you've experienced. All I've heard for sure is that you're seeing things that seem to be hallucinations and sometimes proper dreams. That's not much to make a case for magical empires and such."

Harley's pocket played the first few notes of Thus Spake Zarathustra and Harley looked at his Blackberry in response. Harley's brow furrowed, just slightly.

"What is it?" Marion asked.

"Another five guys just took early retirement packages. Five people in my Department. Five guys senior to me. A lot of people have taken early retirement deals recently. coworkers are starting to worry and starting to gossip, that's what I'm hearing here."

"Is the company in trouble?"

"I don't think so, but the parent company might be. They could be trying to trim expenses from our company to help overall profitability."

"Who's the parent company?"

"Salt and Sons Enterprises Inc."

Marion stood up.

"Might this company have any connection to Darius Salt, the guy who got me fired and about whom I've been having crazy freaking visions? Any chance?"

"He's the CEO, and a shareholder I think."

"And this doesn't seem crazy to you?"

"It sounds coincidental at this point. I'm more concerned about your lack of a job and my suddenly less secure employment status to be honest. If they're offering early retirement now, lay offs may come next. We can't manage if neither of us have a job. So forget your hallucinations for now, or at least try to keep them under control; go look for a job, we may need it more than we thought previously."

Verse Four: Who we Choose to Be

"I thought you said they weren't hallucinations?" Marion said.

"I said you didn't have a tumour." Harley answer carefully, "You told me that you're seeing things. If I've heard you right, that means you've either had visions or hallucinations. I'm going to tend to assume hallucinations until I hear something that convinces me to call them visions. I'm not intending to be insulting, but calling them visions requires a pretty high level of proof. Don't you agree?"

"I just feel like my life is being stolen by something big and awful and crazy." Marion answered, "I'm going along minding my own business and suddenly I'm walking in something out of C. S. Lewis' acid trips. I don't like it. And it's starting to seem less and less like just dreams and hallucinations and more and more like prophecy or visions or something really big and crazy and beyond what I feel ready to handle."

"You didn't have a dream about Darius Salt until after you met him right? That doesn't sound like a prophecy, that sounds like your brain incorporating things into a hallucination. Which isn't a fun prospect, I'll admit. But if you want answers you need to listen for what seems most reasonable given the evidence."

"I didn't meet Darius salt until after but I did see his wife Mary in the vision before I met her. And in the vision, she asked me to look after her children! And her daughter, Maia, called me Dreamer when she

met me. And I was called Dreamer in the first Dream! I didn't tell her any of that. I haven't told any of that to anyone but you. So I'm not just adding information to the hallucinations after I learn it. I'm actually get prophetic visions ahead of time!"

"Are you sure that the woman in your dream was the same woman? Could she have just looked similar? Didn't you say her name was different?"

"Yeah, her name was Morrigan in the dream. And she was dressed different, other than that she was the same person- same face, same build same hair."

"You're sure that isn't your memory playing tricks on you?"

"If it is, then I can't trust anything I think anymore so I may as well just check myself into an asylum."

"Don't go raising the volume to eleven just yet. Let's just keep reviewing this, and think reasonably and see what makes sense."

"What if the answer isn't reasonable?"

"Well, then we address that when and if that's what it starts to sound like- but that would require pretty clear evidence. And even then, we still have to make our living in a reasonable world using reasonable rules. So even if you are having prophetic visions, we need to make certain that after your visions are gone, that we aren't in jail or on trial. So let's take it slow and not assume prophetic visions out of the gate. And, let's move faster on getting you a job so that we can afford life essentials like yogurt and pickles."

"Always the reasonable one."

"That's why we're a good team. I have to head to work. You should look for work. Do you have an up to date resume?"

"My laptop got stolen, I might have one in my email if I can use your computer."

"Help yourself. I need to go. Good luck."

"Don't wish me good luck. You know I'm never lucky."

"I don't think you're unlucky. I think you're in the wrong place doing things you were never meant to do. You just have to find your place, and things will start to make sense."

"That's what's starting to scare me about the visions."

"Let's leave the discussion of the visions for another time. Job first, prophecy second. Pickle money before Prophecy."

Harley dropped the daily newspapers in Marin's lap before he left for work. Marion flipped through the classified section in an obligatory way before discarding the papers and returning to pondering the visions. Marion pulled some printer paper out of Harley's Printer and began drawing out notes to organize the things he had seen. The Firebird seemed important and he gave it a section. The Locust King seemed central and so it got a section of its own as well. The Wendigo had shown up twice, but Marion wasn't sure that they deserved their own section. Marion put the agent looking Men of Black and white under the Locust King section along with the Giant snake thing called Falsenight and the alien looking creature called The Grey. Marion added a note for the Knights of Purity and a line with a question mark cautiously connecting The Knights of Purity and the Men of Black and White. Remembering Mary and Morrigan's red bird patterned clothing, Marion listed both names under the Fire bird along with Maia. After a moment he added the son Fitzroy but with a question mark since the boy hadn't said anything. Darius Salt was placed under the Locust King. And under the Firebird section, Marion added a line with a question mark leading to the word spider and then another line with a question mark back to the locust King section. He added a note under the Locust King for the Chessboard room and another note for the Fantasy Village. He thought back to the first dream, the one in which he and Harley had been called Dreamer and Walker, and not knowing where to file that added a section that he simply labelled as 'first dream'. Under there he added: Dreamer, Walker, and Dreamwalker, then circled them all together and drew lines connecting them to Maia and to Mary/Morrigan. After some consideration he added a note for the delivery guy because of his reference to a phoenix and put a dashed line with a question mark connecting the delivery guy to the firebird. Marion noted several recurring themes, the firebird obviously. The delivery guy talked about a phoenix and called it a firebird. Morrigan and Mary both wore red bird designs on black clothing which seemed to match the vision of the firebird flying through the void of space. Marion's second full vision and first waking vision had been of the firebird. So whatever it was, it seemed to be important. The Firebird also seemed to be a good guy, in as much as Marin's visions could be divided into good guys and bad guy. Likewise, the Locust King seemed to very much qualify as a bad guy, as well as everyone associated with him. Marion couldn't quite tell you was in charge though, as the Locust King seemed not to control the agents known as the Men of Black and White. They seemed to have other superior officers.

And Falsenight seemed less like anybody's servant and more like a force of nature. It was all so jumbled, and Marion wasn't getting the nice neat course overview. He was getting thrown into the mid term exam with no study sessions.

Marion sat puzzling over the symbols and motifs in his visions until his cell phone beeped to announce that Marion had received a text message. Marion opened the phone and read the text. It was from Harley.

<<Hope the job search goes well. No trouble with my computer, I hope?>>

Marion realized he'd been sitting pondering for better than two hours. He quickly sent a text back.

<<Haven't got it working yet.>>

After a brief pause, Marion heard a chime indicated Harley had sent a text back to him.

<<Marion. I'm using my stern parent voice.>>

Marion quickly replied with his own text.

<<Yes, Dad. I'm on it. Out the door any minute now>>

He quickly loaded up his cloud storage through Harley's internet browser and brought up an old resume. The resume was outdated, and he had to mess with it a little to smooth out gaps in his employment history. But he quickly got the thing looking reasonable for menial labour and printed out copies. He hadn't washed his clothes, but a quick smell test and a look in the mirror left Marion feeling okay about that- although he sincerely regretted throwing away his tie now. Harley had left the spare key on the kitchen table and Marion grabbed it and one of Harley's canvas shopping bags to hold his printed resumes. He opened the door cautiously and looked around. Marion couldn't see Mrs. Critchwood in the yard, so he stepped out and turned around to close the door. He was just locking the door when a sharp tin voice behind him spoke loudly enough to make him jump.

"What are you doing here when your friend is at work boy?"

Marion turned around to face the coiled question mark with a witch's nose that was Mrs. Critchwood. She wore old grey sweaters and old grey socks and old ankle length skirts that may have been grey and may just have been too faded to retain a colour. Her hair was restrained in a bun with cheap hair ties.

"Hi, Mrs. Critchwood. How are you doing?"

"I asked you a question boy?"

Marion pulled the papers out of the canvas bag, careful not to show what was printed on them. "I needed to use a printer and my computer got stolen, so Harley said I could use his."

"Why didn't you do it when he was home? And come to think of it, why aren't you at work, hmmm?"

"Because I needed to print them off now, when he was off work would be too late. I don't work today, I started early yesterday and stayed late the day before. Mother day is busy for book season after all. We all know how important our mother's are. But I really need to go, if I'm going to get my errands finished. It's erratic what days I don't work, so I have to take advantage of it. I hope you have a great day."

"I'm watching you like a vulture watching a neglected baby in the desert boy. You better stay on the almighty's good side, because I will be watching you."

"Yes ma'am. I have to go."

Marion squeezed past her and ran. Now Mrs. Critchwood had seen him. It wasn't like he didn't show up when Harley wasn't home normally, but Marion figured he had a finite number of moments like that before Mrs. Critchwood put the pieces together. And Amy added an unpleasant variable to the whole calculation. Marion needed to hand out resumes and find himself a new slave master to pay for his daily bread. He started by going to one of the locally owned independent bookstores, where his education would be -hopefully- an asset and not 'you really are overqualified', which Marion didn't understand. If he had more skills than was necessary, wasn't that a good thing. Maybe they preferred people who had no other options and no ability to question the idiots who ended up as managers. But the book store was a bust. Marion tried handing a resume to the girl at the desk, but when she saw the name her expression changed. She told Marion not to bother giving the resume to the manager, they'd received a call from Percy Wheately telling them not to hire Marion. She indicated that Wheately had named Marion and said he was a liability claim waiting to happen. She also told him that it sounded like Wheately was calling all the local bookstores, and not to bother with bookstores. Marion was deflated by this, but continued on. He handed out resumes at pretty much any retail shop that he passed and, although nobody else told him that Wheately had called to black list him (Marion doubted his ex-manager had any pull outside the book industry) they all gave him the same appraising look that said he wasn't a high school student or a college

student anymore and was over qualified with a weird employment history and obvious gaps where he had no job for months at a time. Marion knew what that look meant. His resume was going in the trash.

He was sitting at one of the outdoor tables at The London Fog Cafe, nursing a green tea latte he had bought with a gift card he'd discovered in his now barren wallet, when a familiar voice interrupted his moping.

"Marion! I heard you were robbed! And then that horrible Mr. Grimly threw you out! What an awful man. How's your brain tumour dear?" Marion looked up to see Mrs. Trilby walking Mercer on one of the awkward cat harness leashes. Mercer was the only cat that tolerated the lease. Mercer immediately nuzzled Marion and wormed up into his lap. Marion began to stroke the cat and Mercer responding with the purr of an oncoming freight train. Mrs. Trilby sat down in the chair opposite Marion, "You look so sad dear, what's wrong?"

And so Marion brought her up to date, him losing his job, losing his apartment, being robbed, Harley's fight with Amy. He told her everything except the visions. She already thought he had a tumour after all. Mrs. Trilby listened quietly and when he explained that he had hadn't out something like twenty six resumes and was fairly confident that they were all doomed, she shook her head.

"You will find your way through this dear. I know this. You are a good person. You like cats, and no person who likes cats can ever be all bad. And you help people. You helped me and Mercer, and don't you forget it. We won't. Now people always say that cats are magic, but I think the best Mercer is going to give you is love. Me on the other hand, I'm going to buy you lunch. And then with a full belly you can take another whack at this whole job search thing a little better balanced. How does that sound?"

"Thank you Mrs. Trilby."

"Think nothing of it. Everyone likes to pay their debts."

She bought Marion a hot dog from the little diner next to the cafe, and overloaded it with sauerkraut and relish and handed it to Marion, who happily devoured it. The two chatted a little more, mostly about Mrs. Trilby's cats while Mercer dug a contented nest in Marion's lap. Finally they parted and Marion set out a little more optimistic and ready to face further rejection. He'd printed about thirty resumes and only had four left. So he went about looking to get rid of them. But no matter where he went he got the look that promised no call back and no job. On his last resume, Marion decided to bite the bullet and try The Seed Bank and Hydroponics Shop that everyone knew sold mainly cannabis seeds. The shop had a help

wanted sign in the window. Marion didn't want to work surrounded by the smell of marijuana, but he knew he needed work. He walked into the sauna of sweet rotting vegetable matter that was the shop and a stereotype in blonde dreadlocks and a Bob Marley shirt sporting a greasy scraggle of a goatee greeted him with a look at Marion's clothes that wasn't promising. Marion handed the being behind the counter his last resume and watched as the face under the dreadlocks twisted and contorted. Finally he addressed Marion.

"This resume man. It tells a story. I can read your life in this resume better than any fricking tea leaves. You study literature all the way to a Master's degree, but not to a PhD or a teaching degree. You got problems with authority and you prefer fiction to reality. You never stay longer than a year at job man, and then you don't work for like four to six months. You have a problem conforming to the structures and rules provided man. You have no skills that work in the real work man, your whole resume tells me where you live most of your life and that's in fantasy land. Nobody is going to give you a job. Not even us."

Marion stared at the the upturned mop of a human in disbelief, "You're a marijuana shop."

"No man, we are a cannabis seed supply store."

"You see a difference?"

"One is legal man. If you can't follow the rules, you're never going to make it in the real world. You don't have to like the rules you just have to know they ain't going to change."

"So I'm too rebellious to sell marijuana?"

"No man. You're too rebellious to self cannabis seeds legally."

"It's not any more right this way."

"Nope. It's just more legal. It ain't about right. The man don't care about right. The man only Cares about rules. His rules. You follow them. Even if you bend them he only cares that you walked his line. You walk in circles man. You're life is nothing but circle. We can't hire you. We need people who can walk the line. Like Johnny cash man."

"With dreadlocks." Marion shook his head, the man behind the counter didn't notice.

"Yeah man, like Johnny Cash with dreadlocks. Like, he's still the man and he still walks the line, but with an attitude that says 'Yeah, I follow the rules, but I do it my way.' You know what I mean?"

"That makes no sense."

"You don't get it man, and that's why we can't hire you."

Verse Five: All Threads Make a Quilt

Marion sat on the couch in Harley's basement for two hours staring at a blank spot on the wall before Harley came home and found his best friend. Harley seemed to consider saying something, but then decided otherwise and simply sat beside Marion on the couch and turned on the television to an old John Carradine rendition of Dracula in black and white. They watched in silence Dracula and the Wolf-man tried to find cures for their conditions, although Dracula was using the search for a cure as a pretext for darker motives.

The movie finished and Marion remained sitting quietly.

"Did you want to get pizza?" Harley asked, "I don't really feel like trying to cook."

"I don't have the money. Charity provided me with lunch today. I literally have negative money. If money was gravity, I would be a small but inescapable black hole." Marion said without looking away from the television set which had begun playing the werewolf classic 'The Howling'. Harley suspected that the channel was doing a John Carradine marathon.

"You're not paying. We're going to order pepperoni pizza, and we're going to break out your birthday gift to me and get ourselves properly intoxicated. We haven't touched that limited run Barley Wine you bought me. What's it called 'Harbinger of Doom'? I still have all six bottles. The stuff is twelve percent."

"Are you suggesting I attempt to drink away this depression? On a weeknight? That doesn't sound like a very responsible solution."

"I am ordering food. I am mandating equal water and beer intake. We are getting properly intoxicated. I am not drinking to the point of hangover and you can sleep in. I am being entirely responsible. But you need something to cheer you up and you assured me that this barley wine will help me find religion. So it's settled."

The pizza arrived quickly. The Barley Wine had just finished chilling wrapped in wet towels in the freezer when the pizza delivery guy arrived with the food. Harley carried in the pizza and flipped the top back before placing the alcohol beside it.

"Give thanks for this feast." Harley said with mock solemnity.

Marion smiled a little and picked up a bottle and raised it in toast, "Many Microbes died to bring us this inebriation."

They were well and truly drunk when Marion's phone beeped to indicate that he had a text.

"Who's that?" Harley asked.

Marion checked his phone and saw that it was a text from Amy.

<<Are you still at my house freak?>>

"It's your girlfriend. Here, you take it." Marion said and handed his friend the phone. Harley took the phone and read the text. Then he typed out an answer.

<<He's still here.>>

Almost immediately a text came back.

<<Is this Harley?>>

<<Yes. Why did you text him?>>

<<Because I'm not talking to you. Call me when the loonies is out. But make it soon. You can't have me and him.>>

Harley handed the phone back to Marion wordlessly. Marion read the texts and shook his head.

"I still Have a sleeping bag. I can go."

Harley picked up another beer and popped the top with his keychain tag. He tipped the bottle to his mouth and tilted his head back. Bottle empty, Harley turned to Marion, "I will not be blackmailed. I am doing the right thing. How can Amy not see that?"

"You want the truth?" Marion waited until Harley nodded and then continued, "she doesn't care about the what's right. She never has. She care about what she wants. She's been raised on a pile of stereotypes and advertising lies that tell her that she's got the right to demand whatever she wants from the world. She wanted a cute devoted boyfriend. But she didn't want to share him. I've been public enemy number one since Amy met me. I tried to make Friends with her. But Amy doesn't have friends. Amy has a checklist of what she wants. And nothing else registers."

Harley shook his head and reached for another drink. "I shouldn't have to choose between my best friend and my girlfriend. This is what you do. You help friends out in their time of need."

"Harley. When has Amy ever acknowledged the sometimes things go wrong? In Amy's world things aren't allowed to go wrong. She stomps her cute little feet and demands that they get better or she'll get so angry."

"It isn't fair. You've been awesome to her." Harley said, "I just can't believe anything I'm hearing from her."

"I know. But the only way she's coming back is if she gets to win. Which means I have time to go."

"You know what? If she wants to believe you're her competition. Fine. Then she can deal with the consequences. I'll wait for her to get over her issues." Harley said finishing a glass of water in a single draw and reaching for another barley wine.

"What if she doesn't?"

"Then I don't want her back."

"Harley you are too drunk to decide this right now."

"No. I try to be reasonable. I try to hear people out and come to agreements. I try to be nice. I don't intend to get walked on."

"She might tell your landlady." Marion pointed out.

"Fine then I'll fight Mrs. Critchwood. My friend is seeing visions and getting kicked around by life. I don't care if it's a tumour or if you're the next Buddha, I'm walking with you. As long as I'm around, you never have to walk alone."

"If you keeping talking that sentimental while we're this drunk, we're going to end the night sobbing about we love each other. Let's not go there."

"Agreed. Nobody wants to see that."

The evening seemed very much settled after that, and the two drank largely in a comfortable silence. Old Film noir dramas playing from the classic movie channel. Some time after one in the morning, Harley announced that he had reached his limit for weeknight drinking and headed off to bed, leaving Marion alone on the couch.

Feeling guilty relief over what Marion was fairly confident was the impending explosion dissolution of his best friend's romantic relationship with Amy, Marion pulled himself up and set about the kitchen and the living room. He put the pizza box in the garbage and rinsed out of the empty bottles and set them as quietly as he could into the recycling bin the kitchen before crashing on the couch to continue watching whatever would distract him.

When Marion found himself standing in the vast chessboard floored expanse, he just shook his head, "This is getting predictable."

Marion looked around for whatever the vision wanted to show him this time, and quickly spotted Darius Salt standing with hands clasped behind his back staring away from Marion. Behind Darius two soldiers in white tabbards stood holding a battered Mary Salt upright. Darius did not look back at the three figures.

One of the soldiers spoke, "We have captured the traitor, Mary Salt, in the name of the Locust King. What are your orders, sir? She stands accused of treason and witchcraft."

"Darius don't do this. You have a choice! Don't do this, don't be what they want you to be! This can be your story! You don't have to play the villain!"

Darius didn't turn around when he spoke, "You forced me into this situation. You left me with no choice."

"Your orders, sir?" The soldier asked again.

"You make your own choices Darius, nobody forces you to do anything. You choose who you will be in the story! Don't choose to be a monster!"

Darius waited until Mary had stopped speaking and then said, "You are hereby found guilty of the charges against you, and I sentence you to die in the name of the locust king."

Marion looked around, but the scene was devoid of anyone else. Maia and Fitzroy were noticeably absent.

One soldier stomped on the back of Mary's knees, dropping her to the ground, as the second soldier drew his sword. Mary was still trying to reason with Darius when the soldier brought the blade down and her voice went silent.

"She forced me into this situation," Darius said, "I didn't kill her, her own stubbornness killed her." Darius finally turned around, and he did so, he immediately noticed Marion and his eyes widened, "You again! This is your fault! I'll make you pay for what you did?"

"Wow, you really are working the self-delusion angle aren't you?" Marion deadpanned.

"Kill him! Kill the dreamer!" Darius screamed to the soldiers. The first soldier drew his sword and the two charged Marion.

Marion summoned up his twin Tomahawks, and noted to himself that he was getting better at doing so. Part of Marion was thinking that he should run, but he was also thinking about what everything meant that he'd been seeing. And it seemed pretty clear that the visions wanted him to act. On the other hand, he didn't know how to use the tomahawks and had only helped kill the wendigo through surprise and luck last time. The soldiers were almost within striking range now, and Marion's chance to make a break for it was disappearing with each foot fall. On the other hand, Marion remembered the first dream, where he had effortlessly known how to fight the tomahawks and where these knights had been so much cannon fodder. Maybe he could do that again.

"That's right isn't it?" Marion said as he drifted into a ready stance without thinking about it. "I am the Dreamer. Everyone else seems to know it, even my subconscious seems to know it. Alright. Fine. If this is a story and I'm supposed to join the story, then fine. The universe can stop kicking me, because I'm ready to take my place in the story. And that means you imperial stormtroopers aren't fighting Marion Day, you're fighting the Dreamer! Whatever that means."

The soldiers entered combat range and Marion was ready. He'd never felt so ready, and the feeling was beautiful. It wasn't a fight, it was a massacre set to ballet. The Dreamer moved like a dervish and the soldier's sword cut nothing but breeze Marion left as he moved. In the span of a single breath, both soldiers lay dead and The Dreamer stood inside a crimson ring now painted on the black and white floor.

Darius glared at the Dreamer, "You don't know the fight you're in for now boy. My wife played your part in the story before you! Look what happened to her! I kill storytellers. You think awakening to your role as the Dreamer will save you? I just killed the Dreamer! I can do it again!"

Marion jolted awake on the couch with a monstrous headache and Darius Salt's threats still ringing in his ears.

"Well that raised the level of engagement significantly." Marion muttered.

Harley was standing in the kitchen mixing smoothies.

"Great. You're up." He said and turned on the blender. The sound of metal blades grinding ice jolted the last bit of slumber from Marion's consciousness and forced him to cover his ears.

"How are you so chipper?" Marion asked when the blender stopped. Harley poured out the smoothie into two glasses and handed one to Marion along with several aspirin.

"One of us drank half his weight in water last night, the other kept explaining that water would dilute the intoxication."

"Sounds like me." Marion muttered.

"Ready for a run?" Harley asked.

"No really. I don't any running clothes anymore. Remember?"

"You can borrow mine, we are different enough sizes my my running gear won't fit you. Come on. You love to run, it will feel good. Down the shake and take your pain meds like a man and let's put miles on your shoes."

"You're not going to give on this are you?"

"Nope. So unless you want me to be late for work, we'd better get going." Harley grinned.

"That's blackmail."

"Yes, it is."

"Fine, let me get changed."

Harley and Marion had not come from wealthy family's and sports had been out of the question growing up unless it was something cheap. Soccer would have been manageable, but both boys had found that they liked the running better than the kicking and liked running without being surrounded by other screaming kids. Running had been meditative for both of them since they were about ten years old. After about a mile, Marion's headache began to wane as the rhythm of the run took over.

"I wish I could just run every day," Harley said as he did there best to float above the pavement, running lightly and smoothly, "I swear I could hit all the main states in a year."

"I bet you could. You'd need to win the lottery."

"That's the only escape from this life, isn't it? If I won the lottery, I'd go pro and compete as a professional runner. We could do it together."

"I'd keep running if I won the lottery. I don't know if I would want to compete. I want to run a video blog site, do commentary and film review and that sort of thing. But, yeah, I'd still run."

The ran about eight miles before calling it quits so they would have time to pick up their lottery ticket before Marion had to leave for work. The Boys always bought their lotto tickets at 'Gnu News' a little corner and news stand that opened early every day. They picked their lotto numbers based on their times

for the run: total time, distance run, fast mile time, and whatever else they needed to fill the numbers. Harley then pulled out his lucky keychain with the red shoe key tag that acted as a bottle opener and rubbed the shoe on the tickets. And then they paid and left with their tickets.

They'd run a little longer that they probably had time for, and so Harley had to leap into the shower and change for work in a hurry. Marion stood back and let him rush, Marion had no place to hurry off to today. Harley grabbed several tubes of snack yogurt and a frozen burrito to take as lunch and then disappeared out the door.

Marion was pretty sure at this point that he was doomed to unemployment, and so Marion wasn't in a hurry. The television was still on and displaying the local news as Marion grabbed some water to finish mitigating his hang over. Then audio from the television drew his attention and Marion stared in shock as the News reported on the murder of Mary Salt, wife of local businessman Darius Salt, and on the kidnapping of their children. Darius Salt was reported to be offering a huge cash reward for the return of his children. The news played a brief clip of an interview with Darius Salt.

The reported asked Darius why he offered a reward, "I want to remind the kidnappers of the stakes. It's a lot of money, and anyone who thinks the reward won't motivate people to look for my children is a dreamer."

Marion froze, his glass of water half poured.

"Did you want to say anything to the kidnappers?" The reporter asked.

"What they've done is stupid. Morality is black and white here. They're dreaming if they think they'll get away with this."

Verse Six: Cut All Ties to the Shore

Harley arrived at the Pandora Offices with their office white walls and modern grey finishings in plenty of time. Harley didn't appreciate being late, it wasn't responsible and it screamed disrespect to the people who were kept waiting. And so Harley arrived early, and generally liked to also leave before he became a bother to remove. Harley knew that people frequently mistook him for a pushover, he didn't mind. Harley

didn't like to fight over scraps and wasn't going to cause a scene if he didn't feel his objections needed to be heard.

Walking through the halls of the office, Harley noticed something wrong. The sounds were wrong. he heard people packing and the voices were too melancholy for a Thursday. Harley peaked into the nearest room and saw people filling banker boxes. As he looked people passed him in the hall, leaving with banker boxes of stuff and escorted by security.

He didn't know the people. And they didn't speak to him, but Harley could hear the meaning of what he was seeing loud and clear. He sped up his walk a little and entered his department. Inside, Harley began counting the empty desks. At least seven people were gone from his department. As Harley walked towards his own desk he saw his manager, Dwight Cutter, waiting at his desk.

"Hey Harley. How's you feeling?"

"Hi Dwight, I can't say I'm feeling great. Walking through the halls on the way here sounded like walking through a morgue."

"That sounds about right, I'm afraid. Hey, at least you're not alone in this right?"

"That depends on what this is? I haven't heard anything solid yet."

"Hey, I don't want to beat around the bush on you. You're a good worker, reliable, and I like you. But this is out of my hands. So, the best I can do is tell you straight out. You deserve that much after all. So, here's the flat truth. I won't sugar coat it. You've been downsized. Pack up your desk and security will escort you out.

"Just like that? Nothing I can do to dispute it? No warning? No notice? How is that reasonable?"

"It isn't fair. That's the truth. hey, at least we're all on the same page. The whole department has been downsized. So it isn't just you, it's me too. I'll be closing my own personnel file once the department has been shut down. We're all out of luck. I mean the luck wasn't going to hold out forever, somebody was going to find out eventually, they always do, don't you know? Hey, who thinks the con job will last forever, right?"

"What are you talking about Dwight? What con job?"

"It looks as though the company has been cooking its books for a few years now. You know? That way they can make things look like they're still growing. It's stupid, people always get caught when they start lying, but they always try you know, you can't hide forever. Am I right? But hey, at least we all go out together, am I right?"

"So what's this, a last ditch attempt to cook the books? The company is cannibalizing itself in final desperate attempt to remain solvent?"

"Hey, I think you nailed it Harley. When you're right, you're right. You're a smart cookie, a sharp thinker. Give me your cell number, and when I find work I'll take you on if I can. We're all in the together, am I right?"

Harley gave Dwight his cell number, but didn't really put much faith in his manager, no, his ex-manager to find him a job. This was it. Now he and Marion were in the same boat, and they'd both lost their oars. It didn't sound good to Harley. It sounded like a freight train bearing down on them. Harley didn't like uncertainty. He built walls against uncertainty, and now uncertainty had beaten those walls to the ground and left him vulnerable. He packed up his desk. filing confidential files in the general locked filing cabinets. He collected his personal belongings, mostly organizers and file folders and day planners, a few trophies from his running. When he finished Dwight sent two security guys to show him out of the building.

Standing in the blinding white sunlight Harley found himself adrift in his mind. He was stunned and tried to take in what this meant for him and for Marion and for his girlfriend and for his ability to pay rent.

He looked at the sky and found himself asked the sky a question. "I'm not Marion. I didn't make dumb mistakes. I didn't give my money away. I did everything right. Why am I being punished?"

The Sky had no answer for him. And after standing on the steps for longer than was probably normal, Harley began to walk home. He was nearly home when he heard an angry voiced raise in lecture. Ahead of him, he saw a man in grubby clothes sitting on the sidewalk hugging a large Neapolitan mastiff to his chest as a middle age man in a slate grey business suit with white pinstripes yelled at him.

"You have no right to keep that dog. You can't care for yourself, how could you possibly care for a dog? You ought to give it up to the SPCA and not let it suffer just because you ruined your life."

"The dog's a stray sir. Wasn't nobody that was caring for before me. I like the SPCA sir, but they have to put down lots of dogs because people like you don't want dogs that aren't cute puppies. I take yelling from folks like you in your fancy suits every day. People like you don't care about me or the dog. You don't want to see stuff that dirty's up your clean pretty little story for the world where everything is nice and white and clean."

The man in the suit stared at the man with the dog and coiled his body and drove a sharp kick into the sitting man's ribs. Harley's vision went red and he charged between the two men as the dog rose up and began barking furiously in defence of its human.

"How dare you! That was assault. Did you not know that was assault? How could you do that?"

The man in the suit crossed his arms, "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must"

Harley paused, took two deep breathes in and the one slow breath out. And then he spoke, very quietly, "Then you better start running, because I am seconds away from doing what I can and letting you suffer the consequences."

The man in the suit ran.

The man with the dog pulled himself unsteadily to his feet still holding his side where he was kicked. The mastiff whined and nuzzled his human.

"Thank you, sir. I don't know why he decided he needed to do that. people give me that lecture every day, and every day I tell them off and then they leave."

Harley shook his head, "The whole world sounds crazy these days. Are you alright?"

"As much as I can, sir. Don't got nobody besides bruiser here to look after me. But we get by. I don't mean to ask for nothing after you helped me, but me and Bruiser don't eat all that regular. Can you maybe spare some change so that we can find ourselves some food?"

Harley considered for a moment, and then reached into his wallet and removed his last twenty dollar bill. He handed the money and his lunch bag to the man. "I normally wouldn't do that, I'll be honest. Not because I don't think you need it, but I tend to place things safe and try to keep resources as back up for

myself. But you know. That didn't stop the world from kicking me. So I'm done with that. find a microwave and share that burrito with Bruiser before it thaws completely."

"Thank you sir. If I'm ever able to help you, sir, you know that I will."

"You already did. I've lost my safety net, but you reminded me that I can still do the right thing. Thank you."

They parted ways, Harley leaving the man to gleefully squirt a tube of yogurt into Bruiser's happy jaws. Harley passed his favourite running route and noticed workers putting up construction signs across the path that he and Marion had run earlier that morning. He noticed a newly raised sign announcing the park was about to go under construction, the park was being torn up for a new apartment high-rise with shopping centre.

"This is the song that life has been playing for Marion for the last few days. Now I know what it's like to listen when it plays for me." Harley tried to take stock as he walked past the park. He had savings, but not a lot due to his student loans. And they would run out quickly.

When he arrived at his suite, he noticed that the lights were on inside. Harley opened the door expecting to see Marion, but found Amy watching Oprah instead, wrapped up in Marion's sleeping bag. She didn't look at him when she spoke.

"So, is the freak gone?"

"You're wrapped up in his sleeping bag. Does that sound gone?"

"Then I guess I'm leaving."

"Why did you come down here then? Did you really think he'd have found both a job and a place already?"

"I was hoping you'd come to your senses and dropped him like a bad habit."

Harley considered this, "No, you didn't. You came here to tighten the screws. I've ignored this before, but you're pretty predictable when I think back to our previous fights. Why have I put up with you this long?"

Now Amy turned to look at him, her face scrunched as though she were eating grapefruit, "Hey! I am the best thing to happen to you!"

"Then I must have an awful life." Harley said.

"You can't talk to me that way!"

"My best friend has been fired, robbed and evicted. You're trying to manipulate me into getting rid of my best friend in his hour of need and now I've been downsized. At this point I think I will talk to you and anybody however I choose to."

"You got fired too? Is the loonie's failure syndrome contagious or something? This is the final straw. We're over."

"Yes, I think we are." Harley answered.

At that point Marion arrived home with Chinese take-out. he opened the door just in time for Amy to storm out.

As she left she turned to Marion "Keep the dead beat! You can have your stupid bromance! I'm not putting in anymore charity work."

Marion turned back to Harley, "See, that's what always confused me. Why'd she think you were a charity project? That's me isn't it?"

Verse Seven: The Call Knows Where You Live

Harley and Marion sat eating take out Chinese food when Harley's phone began to ring. Harley answered the phone, "Hello, this is Harley. I can here you."

The voice on the line sounded as though it belonged to a boy, a young teenager probably, "Is this the Walker? Because we need your help to escape the city. Please listen."

"The Walker?" Marion said, his brow furrowing.

"That's you!" Marion exclaimed, "You're the Walker. It's from my visions. You're the Walker and I'm the Dreamer."

Harley spoke into the phone, "How did you get this number? Who is this?"

"The Witch Doctor gave it to us. Because he said you would help us. Please help us. Our father is hunting us, his men are tracking us. We need your help."

Harley was about to answer, when Marion's phone rang. Marion answered his phone, " Hello?"

A male voice answered, "This is Agent White. You are to turn over the Salt children immediately. Do you understand?"

"You mean as in Darius Salt? The rich guy? We don't have his kids. I only just heard about the kidnapping from the news."

"You will find that feigning ignorance does not impede us. We will retrieve the children. If you do not comply and turn over Maia and Fitzroy Salt immediately the result will be the total destruction of your lives."

"We don't have the kids!" Marion said desperately.

"What do you mean your father's men are looking for you? Isn't that a good thing?" Harley asked.

Harley was struggling to hear what the boy was saying and also listen to Marion's conversation, when a young girl's voice broke in over the boy's voice on the phone line, "Something is really wrong and my dad isn't really who he's supposed to be and he's bigger than what he is here and he has layers and he's trapped by choices and stuff he's making in the other layers and he's bigger on the inside. And we have to escape otherwise everything is going to get lost again and we all have to start all over. Please help us."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harley said, "Maybe you should speak to Marion. Isn't he the Dreamer? Maybe he'd understand better?"

"Agent White, please we don't have any children. We have nothing we can give you." Marion said.

"It is always the Storyteller who assists the rebel children in their escape. The children have escaped. Therefore, the children must be with you. This is not complicated. Your role is well known and you cannot hide from us as a result. We know what you must do. We know the course you will follow. You cannot escape us. We will find the children and if you do not cooperate, we will destroy you as we have many times in the past." And abruptly the line went dead. Marion stared at the phone in shock. Harley turned to Marion.

"Here," Harley said, "Marion's off the phone. I'll give you to him."

"Oh no, they're here. Maia run!" And the line went dead.

Marion and Harley alternated between staring at their phones and then staring at each other. They didn't say anything for a long time. Finally Marion spoke.

"It's not a tumour. They're not hallucinations. It's much much worse than that."

"Yes, it is." Harley agreed.

Harley tried to call the number back twice, but only received a generic answering machine message.

"so what do we do?" Marion asked, "Whatever this is, it's not leaving us alone."

"Whatever this is, it isn't telling us any useful information that we can act upon either."

"I can show you what I've puzzled out," Marion offered, picking up his notes and sketches from the previous day when he was procrastinating against looking for work.

Harley raised an eyebrow and then nodded, "Alright, I'm listening. talk to me. If nothing else, let's get onto the same page."

Marion began by walking Harley through his visions again. Then he moved onto pointing out the recurring characters and themes and conversations. From there Marion went on to explain his guesses as to who was on their side and who wasn't and who was or might be a good guy or a bad guy and how he thought different groups might be connected. By the time Marion had brought Harley up to speed and answered his questions, a few hours had passed.

"Well," Harley said cautiously, "It all sounds like its connected some how. I can hear matching themes and bits that kind of rhyme with each other. But some stuff seems really weird and out of place, like the secret agent guys. Most of the symbols have an old world ancient archetype feel to them, how do generic government agent looking guys fit into that?"

"Maybe they're a modern take on an old symbol? I don't know." Marion answered, he opened his mouth to say more and was interrupted by a knock at the door, sharp and brisk. Both boys looked up in surprise.

"Harley Night. We know this residence is occupied. Open the door." A voice said through the timber panels of the door.

Harley answered the knock at the door and found himself staring at five pairs of sun glasses and five business suits. The lead pair of sunglasses and business suit flashed an ID.

"Special Agent Bridger. We are investigating the kidnapping of Maia and Fitzroy Salt. A cell phone owned by Darius Salt and registered to his son Fitzroy was used to call a cell phone registered to Harley Knight. Are you Harley Knight?"

"Yes, I am. What can I do for you?"

As Harley answered, Special Agent Bridger pushed his way in followed immediately by the other four pairs of sunglasses. Harley looked down in surprise as Special Agent Bridger muscled past him into the room. Harley's carefully composed expression of reasonable concern shifted slightly, his brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed slightly. Marion noticed his friend's lips thin into a slightly harder line. Harley was subtly clenching his teeth.

"I didn't give your permission to come in." Harley said, very slowly, "I'm pretty sure you have to have a warrant to do that."

Special Agent Bridger didn't look at Harley, "Mr. Knight, Sit down. This is very serious."

"Serious enough to break the rules, I guess?" Harley said. Marion noticed that Harley was still holding the door handle, and that his knuckles were white from how tightly he was clenching his fist around the door handle.

"The joke isn't funny Mr. Knight. What was the phone call regarding?"

"It really isn't, but since you aren't listening, I guess I can tell the men breaking and entering into my house about an anonymous phone call I received. Why not?" Harley said, finally closing the door and releasing the handle, "I got a call from two kids, they didn't give their names. Sounded like a teenaged boy and a younger girl. They asked for my help. Said something was wrong with their father. And then they said that somebody had found them and hung up as they yelled at each other to run. I tried to call the number back and got no answer."

"Why didn't you report this?"

"Report what? A crank call? Why would I report that?" Harley raised his eyebrow and gave the agent a decidedly unfriendly look.

"We're going to need your cell phone, Mr. Knight." Special Agent Bridger held out his hand, but still didn't turn to look at Harley.

"Do you have a warrant for that," Harley was speaking so slowly that each word was its own sentence, "Or do you plan to steal it while you're breaking and entering?"

"You don't seem to understand the gravity of your situation, Mr. Knight."

Harley's face clenched sharply. And when he spoke this time, he spoke very quickly with a tone so sharp Marion felt like the words might cut him, "I understand that life has been kicking me and my best friend in the head for the last few days. And I understand that if you really are employees of the government that you have to follow certain rules in order for any of this to be legal. The world has been pushing me around and pushing my friend around, and I've really had enough. I try to be nice and reasonable. But you guys aren't giving me the nice and reasonable vibe. They seemed like nice kids on the phone. I am happy to help, but not without you guys going through the proper channels. Because right now you guys seem less like honest civil servants and more like the agents from 'The Matrix'."

Special Agent Bridger was silent for a moment, and then turned to one of the other pairs of sunglasses, "Go talk to the resident upstairs." he turned back to Harley, "We'll be back in touch Mr. Night, with a warrant. Don't delete anything on that phone. That would be tampering with federal evidence."

The business suits in sunglasses stood up and headed out the door, although they didn't close it as they left. Harley closed the door and turned back to Marion.

"They didn't seem to know about the phone call you received." Harley said to Marion, who nodded in response.

Upstairs, Marion and Harley could hear the suits knocking on Mrs. Critchwood's door and bits and pieces of the discussion that followed, mostly the high pitched shrieks of outrage from Mrs. Critchwood.

After a minutes the screeching ceased, but this was followed by the sound of stomping footsteps and another round of sharp knocking at the door. Harley answered the door to Mrs. Critchwood in housecoat and curlers and full fury like a wet cat trapped in a dishwasher.

"Do you know who interrupted my soap operas?" She howled, "The FBI, that's who. What have you boys been doing to bring the FBI down on your blasphemous heretic heads?"

"Did they say that they were the FBI?" Marion asked. "Because they didn't say that to us."

"Who else would they be you fool? What they want? I will not be harbouring fugitives."

"Those rich kids that were in the news because they got kidnapped. the kids called my cell phone looking for help. Probably dialled it randomly hoping to find anybody who could help. They hung up before they could give any information. The investigators wanted to know about that."

"Why would they call you? What have you been doing wrong?"

"As I just said, if you'd listen, I assume that they dialled it randomly. They ended the call by telling each other to run and that somebody has found them. So I assumed they were desperately dialling any number they could."

"Then why was the FBI there so quickly? Were you already on there watch list? Are you a terrorist?"

"Mrs. Critchwood. The call was placed on a cell phone. I answered with a cell phone. Cell phones are incredibly easy to trace. That is why they were there so quickly. Further they were monitoring the cell phone the children used because it was their father's phone."

"I don't like this. You'd better be on guard. And wait a minute, why is he still here? He was here the day before." Mrs. Critchwood jabbed a shrivelled bony finger at Marion.

"He's my best friend. So there is that. He also got robbed, and lost his job. He needs to use my printer so he can print off resumes. Yeah . He'll be over regularly well he's printing off resumes. I am allowed to have guests Mrs. Critchwood."

"I don't trust you Night. You're hiding something. I'll be watching you, like a vulture watches a dying horse. I have church bridge club to go to and I'm not letting you ruin that. But I'll be talking to you tomorrow. I'm thinking I may need to start looking for a tenant who can follow the rules and obey the laws. If you understand my meaning."

"Have fun at your bridge game Mrs. Critchwood." Harley said and abruptly closed the door in his landlady's face.

Marion stared at the closed door in shock. Mrs. Critchwood knocked loudly, but then stopped. Marion guessed that she was as bewildered by Harley's actions as Marion was.

"This stupid story of yours." Harley said angrily, the rage in his voice causing Marion to step back in surprise.

"It's not my story. I didn't ask for it. The damn thing is happening to me. It's not my fault."

"No, it isn't. But, whatever it is, has taken away our lives, piece by piece. It didn't matter how careful I was, it just took everything. It wants us to be something else and so it's stripping away everything that isn't that or would let us avoid being what it wants us to be. This story has ruined our lives, and we have no idea what kind of a life its offering in place of the lives it took."

"Harley? Something kind of weird to think about, but our lives sucked before this too. My job was already on thin ice and it was a crummy job on top of that. I bounce from job to job and can't hold it together. How is that a life? My landlord and your landlady, they already hated us before this. Anything going wrong could have tipped our housing into worst case scenario. You've kept your job, where I haven't, but you hate your job. It sucks your soul and numbs your mind. I mean when you get down to it, whatever this is, it didn't have to do much to break our lives. Our lives were already filled with hairline cracks, all this thing had to do was gently tap them in order to shatter our lives."

"But why? What does it want? Okay, our lives weren't ideal. We didn't like our jobs and our rental situations were shaky. But I've lost Amy, and what kind of crazy thing are we getting tangled into with those kids now? How is this better? How is this at all better?"

"I didn't say it was better. I just said, we weren't fine before this happened."

"So what? Why would that matter?"

"Maybe this story didn't want us at all. maybe it just needed people who weren't doing something important with their lives?"

"So we're what? The guys who were available? 'Legendary heroes wanted: Must not be using their lives well already?' Is that the idea? So we were just the most pathetic people they found who fit the profile, is that it?"

"Maybe we were just in the wrong place at the right time?"

"Wonderful. Music to my ears, except that music is free jazz."

"I like free jazz."

"Of course you do." Harley said.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Harley?" Marion asked as Harley turned away from the door.

"I have put nice Harley in a nice little box. He'll be there when I need him." Harley didn't look at Marion, wouldn't meet his eyes.

Marion shook his head, "How often does nice Harley go in that box?"

"Not very often. I don't like doing it. But I am very tired of listening to the world tell us that it's going to kick us and we're going to like it. I don't like being angry, people make mistakes when they're angry, people burn bridges and hurt friendships and ruin marriages and make their children cry when they're angry."

"Your parents aren't bad people Harley."

"No, they aren't. They just weren't able to stay reasonable, they got angry and they let it control them. I refuse to make that mistake. But sometimes nice Harley isn't enough, and so nice Harley goes in a box. It isn't fun. I don't like how I sound when I'm angry. But it's done now and for the time being I get to be reasonable nice Harley again."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm tired, and I am going to bed and unless the world ends at midnight I am not dealing with anything else until morning."

* * *

Harley awoke to the sound of his cell phone ringing. He pulled himself awake and answered the phone.

"This is Harley, I can hear you."

"Harley, how are you feeling?" The voice on the other end of the phone said.

"Dwight? What time is it? Why are you calling? Are you still at the office?"

"Hey, funny thing. They have me shredding documents non stop. I haven't been home. I think there's some sort of legal trouble coming, so maybe getting downsized wasn't so bad, am I right? But that's not why I'm calling. So, hey, Harley there are some guys at your old desk. Like in suits and dark glasses and with scary federal looking ID cards and that's never a good thing, am I right?"

"At my desk? What. Now? What time is it?"

"Yeah, right now, it's a little after three. They came in about twenty minutes ago, this was the first time I could slip away without looking weird, or yeah, I would have called you sooner. I mean if I thought this was legit, I wouldn't be calling you, but I can't imagine it being legit, because you are like the most stand up guy I know, am I right? So I looked a little closer and these guys were not legit, and hey that's bad. I mean, they might be legit as in real government agents, you know, but what they are doing is definitely not legit. We're talking 'Three Days of the Condor' stuff here, am I right?"

"The Robert Redford movie? Where he gets framed for uncovering the government's own dirty work by mistake? Wait, Dwight, what are you talking about, you aren't making sense."

"Harley, government agents are going through your old desk right now and they are putting stuff in it. I mean, I think they are planting evidence. I don't know what they are doing, but this just screams of a frame up job, am I right?"

Harley froze and didn't know how to answer. A frame up. His mind cast back to Agent White's conversation, and back to the phone call with the kids: Maia and Fitzroy. He tried to make his brain drag up the things Harley had been saying about Darius Salt and the reward and Marion's dreams. This could all be a mistake. But Harley didn't play risky and the mental calculus of practicality and risk management that Harley's brain performed effortlessly told his conscious mind that the current trouble he and Marion were in had passed the point where business as usual would work. Dramatic action now seemed the only advisable course.

"Thanks Dwight. Clear your call history after you hang up. I don't want you getting in trouble for this."

"Hey, you're a good guy, and good guys deserve to be helped. Am I right?"

"I hope so Dwight"

Verse Eight: Everyone Run Now

Marion and Harley sat at kitchen table. The basement suite was largely dark, only the kitchen light was lit. The two were silent, looking at the table rather than each other.

Finally, Marion began speaking, "It worse than we thought. It's not just taking away the things in our lives, this story is going to destroy our ability to make new lives, and I mean completely destroy it. We're in the story now and if we don't play by the story's rules, we're going to end up in jail forever, and now we're being framed and I really shouldn't have killed those guards in that vision, because really got them mad, but what was I going to do?"

"Breathe. Marion. Listen to me. This is bad. This is all so bad that I lost tempo, lost my cool. I don't like yelling. And I've been yelling a lot more than I would like to be lately. So now we breathe, and we make a decision."

"We still have things left that we get to decide?" Marion asked, "It feels like this thing has taken all of our decisions away from us."

"We've been given bad choices, and placed in unpleasant situations. Yes. I hear what you're saying. But the thing it can't take from us, no matter how matter bad situations it places us in, no matter how many impossible choices it gives us, we still get to decide how we respond. I choose how I live. I choose how I die. Nobody else chooses that. I choose how I die. I decide what note my song goes out on. So now it's time that we decide that."

"So what choices have we got?"

"Well. Choice number one, we go meekly like lambs to the slaughter. I don't like that option. The lord is not my shepherd, because I refuse to be a sheep. So, choice number two: we run. As long as you're okay with the idea that we are about to become fugitives from justice."

"I'm with you Harley. We're night and day, you can't have one of us without the other."

"So we run. The question is, how shall we run. I'm not running without knowing where I'm running to."

"How do we choose that? We don't know anything useful."

"We choose what our mission is going to be. Are we going to be part of this story or resist it? Once we choose that, we'll know what to listen for and how to run. So, do you want to be the Dreamer? Do I want to be the running man?"

"The Walker. We're already going to be on Running Man."

"So what's our choice?"

* * *

The Men of black and white, clad in suits and sunglasses despite the washed out grey light of the false dawn arrived at the house in a small convoy of white unmarked vans. They filed out like tin soldiers in a line and quickly surrounded the house, positioning themselves next to all window and doors. Fingers pressed earpieces into place and voices whispered coordinating verbal chatter that mimicked the sounds of the crickets. They swarmed around the building with a quiet insectile hum.

As the suited figures finished moving, a pair of men of black and white stepped out of the van nearest to the basement door with a large two person hand held battering ram. Warm lights glowed through orange curtains from within the basement as the two agents positioned themselves in front of the door to the basement suite.

The chatter quieted in the same way the forest goes quiet prior to a predator attack, the world froze as though waiting for the mountain lion to strike. The men of black and white drew their firearms, nondescript pistols of indeterminate make and model. The air tightened like a violence string, the wind tasting of cold gun metal.

The two agents at the door swung the battering ram back and up. The giant steel beam hung in the air momentarily like a suspended judgement. And almost as though time had frozen and then slowly begun to thaw, the battering ram began to swing down. Speeding up as it dropped, the metal pole hurtled towards the unsuspected door.

And then the door burst inwards, buckling under the battering ram, and agents rushed in and noise and violence rushed around like a landslide. Agents charged into the entryway of the basement suite and pointed guns at the empty kitchen table. They moved quickly into the deserted living room, noting clothing and linens scattered across the floor. One agent stopped to examine the computer, its casing opened and the hard drive removed. Three more agents entered the single bedroom and noted the empty closet and the dresser drawers sitting empty on the naked bedroom mattress. Upstairs Mrs. Critchwood screeched like an angry bird and her own door was knocked inwards and agents stormed her home.

"targets have fled. No contact with targets. Advise immediate search of the area. Spread out. Question all possible targets. Highest priority."

As the men of black and white began to fan out and search, a single figure in a white latex gloves and a grey long coat stepped out of the furthest van. He had a white trimmed moustache and goatee, and dressed in a linen suit the colour of pale bone china. He was slim and tall and regal and lethal in his posture and demeanour. On the lapel of his long coat were a row of seven silver pins: a sewing needle,

an easter egg, a flying duck, a running hare, a treasure chest and an oak leaf. He walked slowly and arrived quickly. Standing beside on of the agents.

"You do not have them?"

"No, sir. We are surveying the area, we will find them."

"This is not the way to chase them. This game board is of little relevance. I will pursue them with my forces within the wild hunt."

"We have orders from our superiors to apprehend them, sir."

"You are not my concern. Do as you like. I am merely observing. The real game will be played on other battlefields."

"Yes, sir."

The agent's earpiece crackled, "We have a witness."

The agents had converged around an older man in grubby brown clothing standing with a massive neapolitan mastiff who was leaning into the older man's leg so strongly the old seemed to be held upright by the dog.

The man was pointing northward as he spoke, "Oh yes sir, I saw them two. They left less than an hour ago. They were heading north on Highway sixteen. Yes sir, I saw them sir."

The men of black and white touched fingers to ear pieces and began to speak, "Send pursuit north on Highway 16, Repeat targets are travelling north on highway sixteen. One hour head start. Pursuit is still viable."

* * *

The pre dawn light was gradually deepening to a heavy red. The light bathed the goblin as Harley drove the ancient van south on Highway thirteen. They had stopped at an ATM machine downtown first and cleaned out as much money from Harley's account as they could before the bank machine had stopped them. And now they were running.

"So you know," Harley said, "Between the two of us we've got very little in the way of personal belongings, virtually no money and we are fugitives from an unjust system and some weird amorphous force people keep referring to as a story. We've got no legal recourse and no way out if and when we're caught. And we've got no homes to go back to."

"This was your idea. And besides, I'm used to being unlucky. How are you doing."

"I will endure. Sometimes that's all you can do."

* * *

There is a place within every story where people do not wish to go. There is a place in every story where even the bravest are driven to panic and chased by their fear. This dreaded place is often named, but these are mere echoes and the names mean nothing. The place in which fear dwells is unknown, a void of understanding.

The Hound stirred in the darkness of the void. The Hound became aware that it was the subject of conversation.

"Send the Hound."

"Do not presume to order us little King. We are not your servants."

"We have to find them. Without them the Golden Age ends. The Empire falls. You owe me this."

"We owe you nothing, remember that well. You made a bargain with us and we have honoured every part of that bargain. If you fail and your little empire falls, that is you failing to honour your half of the bargain."

"Unless you want everything we built to fall apart, you'll send the hound. YOu have as much in this game as I do."

"Perhaps then, it is fortunate that we both know that it is a game."

"Stop trying to play mind games with me and send your super monster after my kids. The Bone Man pursues them already, why send the Hound as well?"

"The line can't be broken. I won't let my line end."

"Lines end eventually little King. Do not forget that."

"Well just make sure it doesn't end here and now. Let the next generation drop the ball. Send the Hound."

"We have honoured our side of the bargain. This requires a new deal. What do you offer?"

"You could at least dress up in red and horns if we're making deals again."

"Red is the colour of life, the colour of fire. The colour of fear is grey."

The Hound was not interested in the bargaining. the Hound did not care about the deal. The Hound listened only enough to understand that the deal would be reached. The Hound would be freed. The Hound would help. The Hound would hunt. Would the prey run? The Hound would see them run. See if they run. Soon.

"For though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again."

— *Proverbs 24:16*